

Cumberland Gap National Park Oral History Project

Transcription of Jean Ausmus oral history interview

Conducted on February 4, 2010

Interviewer: Martha Wiley

Transcriber: Pam Lewis, May 16 - 21, 2011

START OF TRACK 1

INT: OK, we are here on February 4th, 2010. This is Martha Wiley speaking with Mrs. Jean Ausmus. Okay, Mrs. Ausmus, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Were you born in Middlesboro?

AUSMUS: I was born in Middlesboro, born in this house. I've lived here all of my life. And so... the house is ... like me is kinda getting old.

INT: May I ask your age?

AUSMUS: I'm 85.

INT: 85, thank you.

AUSMUS: I taught school for 40 years.

INT: Where did you teach?

AUSMUS: Taught in Middlesboro. The last 15 years I was supervisor of instruction.

INT: All right, and what we're going to talk about today is the Dark Ridge area of the park. It's an area that we can see a lot of foundations of buildings but we don't know much about the people who lived there. And I understand you know a lot of stories from your grandmother.

AUSMUS: My mother.

INT: Your mother.

AUSMUS: My mother.

INT: And what was her name?

AUSMUS: My mother's name was Lola Ausmus. And she was a first grade teacher but this particular year-- 43 and 44... I think that's right, she taught at Dark Ridge. That's a one room school. But it was a

novelty to me ... to learn about a one room school such as it is. Dark Ridge was sort of an isolated area and the way I remember it ...the school district ran from 25E, the old 25E, you still go that way when you're going under the bridge to the Pinnacle knob-- that was the beginning of the ... south end and the north end of the school district. I think was set at the entrance to Sugar Run Picnic Area and children walked to the school. And the year that my mother taught there, my daddy would pick up some of them and bring them on in to school because they had a long walk. Those children lived on at the south end. They came across the ridge just to the east end area of Middlesboro and walked across. And so my daddy would pick'em up and bring them on in to school. And then on Sunday morning then there would be somebody usually knocking at our door and it would be that family going to Sunday School at the Salvation Army here in town, and they would always come by early to see us because they felt acquainted with my mother and also with my daddy, since he would pick them up and take them to school as he took my mother.

INT: And that was this house they did this.

AUSMUS: This house, yes.

INT: Now ...

AUSMUS: They sat around the dining room table when they'd come in on Sunday morning.

INT: 988 was that road there at that time the one that goes...?

AUSMUS: Yes, it was gravel.

INT: OK, all right.

AUSMUS: The school, I don't know how to tell you where it is, unless, we'd have to go see it to find.

INT: Well, there is a little parking area and from what I understand it was across the road from that.

AUSMUS: The way I remember it there were three houses across the road. One of them had a daughter or a granddaughter at the school in school, fourth or fifth grade and I may be wrong but I think

that she was the best reader of anyone in that family. And so when the mail would come and they would get a letter from a son or grandson in the army, that time he was overseas, they would yell and she would go over and read the letter ... leave the schoolroom, go read the letter, and then come back to school cause they were anxious ...maybe they just wanted her to just look at the letter too. But anyway when they got a letter she always just left the school to go home to read it to see what he had to say.

INT: Now, so you do not know the years of when the school was in operation?

AUSMUS: No, I do not. I wish I did. Now then the year that I was acquainted with it my mother taught there... was '43 and '44, or '44 and '45.

INT: OK.

AUSMUS: I don't know which.

INT: And you said that the children would walk... from what I understand is it where the Vista Venado subdivision is?

AUSMUS: No, it wasn't. I don't believe they came that far. I believe they would have gone to another county school. I believe the ones went to Dark Ridge were more in this area up here -what's now park area.

INT: OK, and do you remember what grades that school was?

AUSMUS: All eight grades.

INT: All eight grades. All right.

AUSMUS: They had desks nailed to the floor just like the old fashioned school and there was some little ones for the first grade and then there was larger desks for the middle school and the middle and the eighth grade. And the room was sort of bare-- it had those desks.

INT: How large? Can you compare to this room?

AUSMUS: I don't believe it was as large as this room. I really don't. It might have been as wide as this room with windows on either side. And I don't remember if it had electric lights or not. I do remember most one room schools had just the one hanging from the ceiling, you know, or two. I don't know if that one did or not. I do know it had the windows on either side, and a pot-bellied stove in the middle. In the back of the room was the door where you went in or out. There was a rough looking table back there. That's where the water bucket sat. The children brought their paper cups or their glasses whatever so they'd have something to drink out of. The spring was across the road where the parking lot is. Back in there somewhere there was houses there and that's where the children went over to get the water out of the spring for their drinking water.

INT: I see. Would they go home for lunch?

AUSMUS: No, they would bring their lunch and my mother fell in love with those children. 16 or 17 of them. And in the winter time on that pot-bellied stove she would cook and the older children would watch it. Of course she did most of the ... food in it. But the children were invited to bring something out of their garden home. So they would bring potatoes, onions, something like that to go into the soup. And the night before, mother would make cornbread to take to school the next day, if they had pinto beans or sometimes with the soup. But school started early in July and the children of course walked, except this one family. They would bring what they had to eat. I don't know what they had, I guess something now they're growing at home 'cause it was a far piece to the store back then, you know. I don't remember any stores back in that area. And the children that lived down at the end where the Sugar Run Picnic area is - they didn't walk that curvy road up to the school, there's a path that if you think about it, that would go straight from Sugar Run up the hill to where the school would have been.

INT: I think I've seen a road trace.

AUSMUS: A little pathway.

INT: Now was that area known then as Dark Ridge and Sugar Run at that time?

AUSMUS: It was Dark Ridge School.

INT: Dark Ridge School.

AUSMUS: I think it was Sugar Run.

INT: Do you why how it got the name Sugar Run?

AUSMUS: No, I don't. It's interesting though, isn't it?

INT: It is. I've been trying to find out. Your mother taught there then just for two

AUSMUS: One year.

INT: One year.

AUSMUS: Started in July. They had seven months school in the county then. I started teaching the same year but I was at Fonde and I had just one grade. I made \$81 a month, my mother didn't make quite that much because she was an emergency teacher at that time. She had taught two years before she married but then didn't teach any more than that. Didn't get her degree until later. So I think she made like 78 or 79 dollars a month.

INT: Goodness!

AUSMUS: As I told you, she took a lot of things to school.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: Food as well as puzzles, books and things like that too. She really enjoyed the children and as I said, it started in July, went seven months. I believe they got out about the last part of January because she didn't take much time for Christmas or anything. That way they were ahead of most of the cold weather. But as I say they had soup and pinto beans a lot of the times cooked on that pot-bellied stove.

INT: Was there an outhouse I suppose there?

AUSMUS: Yes, and the way I remember it, there was only one outhouse - not one for the girls and one for the boys. But it was up there above the school on the side of the hill.

INT: Do you remember any names of the children? This family I have been talking to were the Beason family.

AUSMUS: No, I thought there were Wilsons from down in near the Sugar Run Area lived in there. But I don't know if any of 'em are still down in there or not. But I believe Michael said there were some back off of the road back in there.

INT: We have a Wilson working at the park whose family lives back in there.

AUSMUS: Oh, do you?

INT: Yes, Amy.

AUSMUS: OK.

AUSMUS: The ones that lived up this way that came down the road, that my daddy picked up in the car were Cruisenberrys. I don't think any of them left. But one of the boys was Daniel Boone, one of the girls was Cora Kate. They were named after people that they knew here in town. I guess they knew Daniel Boone.

INT: (laughter)

AUSMUS: But he was Daniel, Daniel Boone. Sweet children as they could be. And I don't know, I guess they all brought a lunch when something wasn't cooked, I'm sure they did.

INT: Do you know, did they close the school after that year?

AUSMUS: No, most, no, I would say it was in the late 50's when that school closed. I am thinking ... after the war and in the late 50's and the early 60's consolidation began everywhere. And I guess that's when the buses started running everywhere. That's when they did here in Middlesboro, was in the early 60's. So, I am thinking that those children then went to what was Ward Chapel. Do you know where that was?

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: So I'm thinking that's where they went then.

INT: When the park came in -- I'm wondering if the school closed before the park had the land in the 50's then?

AUSMUS: I don't know.

INT: OK.

AUSMUS: I guess the park came in ... they may have.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: And I don't know when. I'll tell you who could probably tell you a lot about that would be Ike Slusher, because he was superintendent, and assistant superintendent, he's not as old as I am but he's been around awhile.

INT: Of Bell County?

AUSMUS: Of Bell County. He lives here in town.

INT: I think I've met him.

AUSMUS: OK, ask me some questions

.

INT: So you said there were 16 to 17 children.

AUSMUS: Yes.

INT: And from all ages from first grade to eighth grade.

AUSMUS: And you know most of them, they were from maybe 3 or 4 families, that was just've

been it. There was this little girl who lived across from the school and then the Cruisenberrys, there was 3 or 4 of them and the Wilsons, there was 2 or 3 of them. So, there weren't too many houses back in there that I can remember.

INT: Well, the Beasons were living... it was as you head towards the school down 988 and there is a little road that takes you down to where the rangers now use for firearms training. And down that road there are several house sites.

AUSMUS: Oh, OK.

INT: That would be in that district. And the woman I spoke to she said her husband remembered a school up there. So that fits.

AUSMUS: OK.

AUSMUS: It's a shame they tore down the school, 'cause it was really an old fashioned looking school.(laughter) Built like this, had the door facing the road. And then as you went in the thing you saw was that pot-bellied stove at the other end. The chalkboard was behind the stove. So there was a lot of times you couldn't use much of that board at all, I'm sure.

INT: Sounds a little bit like the one up at Hensley Settlement now.

AUSMUS: Well, probably.

INT: Similar.

AUSMUS: I've never been up there so I can't tell you.

INT: Oh, you haven't been.

AUSMUS: No.

INT: I had a question.

AUSMUS: But my name is up on a tree up at the lookout - Pinnacle.

INT: (laughter) On a tree!

AUSMUS: (laughter) I didn't do it. (laughter)

INT: (laughter) Well, I was going to ask you if you knew what happened to the families when the park came. If you remember.

AUSMUS: The Cruisenberrys... moved. Two of the children lived here in town, but they've died. Two of them I know lived at Noetown. So they came in. And the ones across from the school, I don't know where they went.

INT: OK, because I assume the park must have knocked down the houses. Because nothing's there.

AUSMUS: Yes, I think they did. I don't know when the park bought them.

INT: It would have been the early 1950's, I believe.

AUSMUS: Would it? OK.

INT: When the states were getting land to donate to the federal government.

AUSMUS: Well, I would say if that's the case that's when the school closed. I think the next year somebody came up there and taught. Not many people I have to say, would really enjoy as much as my mother did. You see my mother -- it was 1943, she was 43 and ... I was grown. Michael's daddy was ...7 or 8 years old . And she ... worked with those children, she liked them, she realized ...the hardship that they had living out that far, but they were happy children. I don't remember her ever saying they had a fight, or anything like that.

INT: So it was a poorer community out there ...isolated? What do you know what the families...

AUSMUS: No.

INY: What the fathers did ...?

AUSMUS: No.

INT: Did they use the building as a church as well, do you know?

AUSMUS: I don't think so. I never heard of it if they did. And some boy lived in one of the houses across the road ...built the fire in the winter time so the building would be warm when they all got there. And so paid him a little I think to do that, you know. Just to get the chill off the building.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: The coal pile was outside, I guess the school board sent in a ton or two of coal -- one ought to be enough.

INT: Did the ...whole school system have ...the whole county have that schedule of starting in July to January or was that different because of it being isolated?

AUSMUS: No. Most of them started in July. Most of them did.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: Especially the smaller schools out...

INT: Was that the only one room? That seems very late to have a one room.

Ausmus: No, no that's not the only one. When they began to fade ...was after the war and that's when consolidation began. You see... up until that time very few school buses. That's hard to believe, but it was in the 1960's when Middlesboro got a school bus. And I was teaching at Central School over by the post office.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: You know. And the children were thrilled to death with that bus. And they would say if you were on bus duty you had it forever 'cause they just had the one bus. They'd make all these rounds and come back and get another.

INT: Oh my goodness.

AUSMUS: That was ... so exciting in 19 and 60 that I think was about 1960, so consolidation really didn't begin until after the war settled down and things kind of got back to normal.

INT: OK.

AUSMUS: So there are a lot of one room schools. Up this way, going above Noetown, going to across that mountain. I remember there was ...Edgewood School, which was a two-room school. On up a little bit further was Monarch, a one room school. On up to another mining camp was Capito, a two-room school and on up a little farther was ... Grameta, it was a two or three room school. Went on across the mountain that way too. So yeah, ...they were common up until about the 1960's.

INT: Do you remember any other stories your mother would tell of the students or the school?

AUSMUS: Well, let's see.

INT: Did they help around the school?

AUSMUS: Oh yes, yes they were such happy children. I guess to get out to play with other children, I don't know. I was up there one day during school I remember, and it amazed me how the ... some of the girls lived down around Sugar Run, sweet girls, the little ones just beginning to read ...they would read to the older girls you know, so they could correct them. Or help them with easy arithmetic and things like that, so they assisted that way. You put those older ones to work doing things like that.

INT: ... trying to picture your mother teaching all these different levels at once.

AUSMUS: It ain't easy. (laughter)

INT: No! (laughter)

AUSMUS: You...well, you have different groups even with one grade you know. But what you have to do ... I'm working with you in reading, but I have to keep Boots busy doing something, so you give them something to do. Maybe while I'm working with you with reading, they would be working on spelling, arranging the words in alphabetical order, or writing sentences with the spelling or maybe doing something in arithmetic, that they can do it when they came to you, then you would talk about it. See, you had to do planning like that.

INT: I see.

AUSMUS: So ... 'course with 16 kids -- if you had fifty it would have killed you to have them all at one time.

INT: Sure, yes, that's right! All right. So 988 was there the road was, just the same, it was gravel but it was the same route down that way.

AUSMUS: It was gravel.

INT: It was the same route down there.

AUSMUS: Yes, the same route.

INT: Do you know, was the Cumberland Motel still there at that time, that you would pass it on the way?.

AUSMUS: Up on the mountain? I don't know if it was still there or not. I guess it was.

INT: ...

AUSMUS: I would say it would have been.

INT: So people would come through that way, I guess.

AUSMUS: No, not normal, not that ... no they didn't come down ... you mean on that gravel road?

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: No, not many came through that way, I guess just the people that lived there going on over to Colmar and things like that.

INT: OK.

AUSMUS: There wasn't . . . I don't think there's many tourists that came down through there.

INT: Yes, all right.

AUSMUS: I'll tell you what I did when I was teaching ... out at west end. We went up there in January. I took a group, a reading group, the ... from mother down were talking about the path that came up the creek. We saw the little tadpoles and everything. We sat there, the ...cook at the school fixed hot dogs and things like that to eat. We sat on rocks, it was kind of icy, and looked at all the grounds around. 'Course I loved it better than anybody because ... it brought back memories But the kids had the best time walking up and down that. They wanted to walk up to the Pinnacle the back way, but I said we didn't have time. The bus was waiting on us. But that's the old good places to take children on excursions and trips.

INT: You can still see some house foundations and plants, you know flowers that somebody planted out there.

AUSMUS: Yes.

INT: Well, we're hoping to put a little sign out to talk about the people who lived there.

AUSMUS: And when I was a child, I'm talking about my name on the tree. It was up there in 1929 so ...daddy did it.

INT: (laughter) OK.

AUSMUS: Anyway, we would go to where Sugar Run is now and walk up the back way to the

Pinnacle. I've done that many a time.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: So, I think Michael has heard so many of those tales that that's kind of helped him to fit in, you know.

INT: Well, it helps the park too to have some people work there that have ties to the community, because with national parks so often you have people who come from outside to work there.

AUSMUS: Yes.

INT: And it's been wonderful to have Michael and some others who, you know, are a link.

AUSMUA: Yes.

INT: To the local communities. It helps.

AUSMUS: He said one day, you know I know more about up that way than a lot of them. And I am sure he does 'cause he's heard that all of his life. Course he'd never saw my daddy, but if he had they would've . . . if daddy had been able they'd been walking all over it, you know. But Wayne, my brother, Michael's daddy, likes to walk too and so he has taken those three boys all of them over the mountain sides too through the years.

INT: I believe there is a road up by that school as well that we have roped off to the Cumberland College road, I think is it called. Do you know?

AUSMUS: No.

INT: OK.

AUSMUS: Cumberland College?

INT: Yes, ... I think it was owned by them at one point.

AUSMUS: Could have been, could have been.

INT: So, OK, ... should I talk to Mr. Thompson did you say? Was he the person I should talk to at the Bell County...?

AUSMUS: George Thompson

INT: George Thompson

AUSMUS: He's the superintendent.

INT: All right.

AUSMUS: Ike Slusher could tell you some things too, I think.

INT: It's interesting when...

AUSMUS: George Thompson is the superintendent, and he's a fine man. I like him.

INT: So they would have records of all the old schools, I suppose.

AUSMUS: They should.

INT: They should.

AUSMUS: They should, they should have them.

INT: Yeah, OK.

AUSMUS: Might be hard to find them.

INT: Well, I have seen it mentioned in the history of Middlesboro. But there's not much about the Dark Ridge School, but it helps.

AUSMUS: It's not in Middlesboro... wasn't a city ...

INT: Well, that's true, but they also I guess have the Bell County...

AUSMUS: Yeah

INT: I have seen the name.

AUSMUS: They might have something at the Bell County. But Bell County schools should, but I don't know. In your questions you want to ask me -- have I told you anything...?

INT: You have, you have...

Starting Track 2

INT: Go ahead about Fern Lake.

AUSMUS: Fern Lake -- the boat house had built up enough that they would anchor the boats underneath the boat house so that you know people could fish. I always tagged along to go fishing with my daddy. There were row boats. And he would say, "Sit still or the fish won't bite." Well, I'd say, "I'm thirsty." I remember one time he said, well, just dip down and get you a drink. Had a tin cup had to drink water that was warm but of course it was OK I guess. There was some springs around Fern Lake too at that time. Maybe still over there, I don't know. But when we'd walk over on Sunday afternoon... clean out the springs where the leaves had fallen in so the water would run down into the lake. Beautiful around that Fern Lake. That was a good Sunday afternoon's walk to Fern Lake.

INT: I bet it would have been. Now I know we're also going to put a sign over by Bartlett Park. I bet you remember the swimming pool and the ...

AUSMUS: Yeah.

INT: The bath house.... I guess there was a dance pavilion and...?

AUSMUS: Yes, I remember the swimming pool. There's a picnic area is now.

INT: Right, right.

AUSMUS: The water was always muddy and sandy cause it had a sand bottom you know. But also my mother's brother was swimming one day and he felt something around his legs. He reached down and there a ...a young man had drowned.

INT: Oh, dear.

AUSMUS: A boy here in town.

INT: Because I guess you couldn't really see, it wasn't clear.

AUSMUS: You couldn't see, it was just so sandy, he was over on the deep side ... near the ... diving board and all, you know.

INT: Do you remember when that pool operated... do you know when it closed?

AUSMUS: When I was a senior in high school that's where we ... 1941... that's where we had our picnic over there. It was still going then, so I'd say it closed soon thereafter.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: But that was a nice gathering place.

INT: Well, I understand you could get a bus here at the Greyhound Station and take it to the park there and I saw an advertisement for that in one of the old newspapers.

AUSMUS: I don't remember that.

INT: So you would walk from here to over there.

AUSMUS: Oh yeah, we would walk often, go the railroad track, you know.

INT: Yes.

AUSMUS: And not far, or go in the car, but I never remember going on the bus over there. At that time you could walk from the Bartlett Park area through that way to the lake.

INT: Yes, I know there is a road going that way.

AUSMUS: Yes.

INT: Yes....

AUSMUS: There's cemeteries back there too.

INT: There's a Marsee cemetery that they are still using.

AUSMUS: Do they?

INT: Yes, it's still active. I am still learning where some cemeteries are. I believe that there is one back in the Dark Ridge area that I have heard .. well... just a couple of graves.

AUSMUS: I believe there would be some, I don't know.

INT: I want to map all of those. And then I guess back there was the brewery and the meat packing plant.

AUSMUS: That's on the way to Bartlett Park.

INT: Yeah. OK. It's very hard for me to picture some of the... because the road was different.

AUSMUS: You went in past the packing house, the brewery was there before my time. But same building. But it was a big building that I can remember when I was in high school -- we went to the packing house to see it all done. I was in the Home Ec. Well, they took the cows up to the certain place and knocked the heads. That's how they killed them.

INT: Yes, so...I wondered about that, the packing house part of it looks like part of the old brewery. The brewery was a huge Victorian but then...

AUSMUS: It's all there, same spot. I think built out of ...

INT: One of the smaller ends.

AUSMUS: I think so.

.

...

INT: You could walk pretty much straight over to the park?

AUSMUS: If I was going to the park now?

INT: No, no, then.

AUSMUS: Then.

INT: If you were going to Bartlett Park.

AUSMUS: OK, back then I would've gone up to what is now 12th street to the KFC. There was a little footbridge through there. I'd go that way, then there was a road that you turned to your left that went to the packing house and so you walk that road, then turn right and went that way.

INT: So could you walk back to the lake that way as well?

AUSMUS: Yeah, and some people would walk that railroad trestle but no, not me.

INT: (laugh) and I understand a lot of churches did their baptisms...?

AUSMUS: What, now?

INT: A lot of churches would perform their baptisms back in there.

AUSMUS: They did. They had baptismal services there, near that railroad trestle I believe it was.

INT: I've seen a photograph of one service but I haven't been able to locate. But that's what I understand -- several churches used the Fern Lake ... the Yellow Creek there too.

AUSMUS: Yeah, they did, I had forgotten that, but they did. I guess... so many churches did not have indoor baptisms then.

INT: Well, thank you.

THIS INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED FOR CLARITY AND EASE OF READING. THE ORIGINAL IS ON FILE AT THE PARK.